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WHAT PEOPLE THINK ABOUT FIRE LAW ENFORCEMENT

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There is an old story about a farmer that had a very intelligent, hardworking mule. However, always before giving it a command he hit the mule between the eyes with a baseball bat. Not because the mule needed discipline, but because this was the only way the farmer knew to get the mule's attention.

In a sense this may be the problem that we face when we try to get compliance with forest fire laws in California. Are people paying attention to fire safety rules, and, if not should we make more use of our legal baseball bats to insure their attention? A recent study may give us some clues. 1/

The study was conducted by the University of Southern California under contract to the Pacific Southwest Forest and Range Experiment Station. Its objective was to develop the framework for a larger-scale research study to determine the attitude of the public towards law enforcement. Though primarily a search for satisfactory experimental design, this pilot test points out some important differences between violators and non-violators as a group. The results show that the average fire law violator is an honest, intelligent citizen, well aware of the importance of fire prevention, but that we have just failed to get his attention on specific fire regulations.

Since the study sought to find differences in attitude and knowledge between fire law violators and non-violators, Dr. Herrmann prepared two lists of persons. Names and addresses were obtained from lists of

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1/ Herrmann, W. W., 1960, A Research Design for the Evaluation of Attitudinal Aspects of Fire Law Enforcement. Univ. of So. Calif. Sch. of Pub. Admin., 48 pp. (processed).

property owners on file at the Big Bear sheriff's sub-station, from Arrowhead District Ranger Station, and from license numbers of cars driven by forest motorists.

The names of fire law violators were taken from the law enforcement records of the San Bernardino National Forest. The violators came from 66 towns and cities throughout southern and central California. Their distribution was about what could be expected, taking into consideration population and distance, with two possible exceptions. No violators were "out-of-state" residents, and only 11 percent of the violators were forest residents despite the fact that nearly half of the use and slightly more than half of the man-caused fires on the San Bernardino forest come from local residents. Of 675 people in the combined lists, 256 non-violators and 42 violators agreed to cooperate in the study.

Admittedly the 298 persons sampled is a very small percentage of the San Bernardino Forest's visitors, let alone California forest visitors. Yet the study can give us some pretty good ideas on how people feel about fire law enforcement in southern California. In addition it gives us some information on the makeup of the fire law violator group.

What Kind of Laws Are Violated?

For the most part the laws were not broken because of a lack of what could be called "common sense." They were rather specific regulations that needed to be learned and some of them actually involved forestry jargon or shop talk. For example, the most persistent violation concerned fire closure areas. The USC researchers found "closed area" means many things to many people.

The 138 violations were broken down in the following way:

Closed area	62
Improper use of fire	44
Smoking illegally	9
Trespass	3
Miscellaneous	20

The miscellaneous group includes such items as dumping hot ashes, blasting without a permit, and inadequate spark arrestors.

Do Forest Users Know The Law?

Most people think that it is difficult to keep from violating fire laws. Thirty-one percent of the non-violators and 53 percent of the violators said that they did not have enough information about laws or rules to avoid breaking them.

When asked "Do you think it is easy or difficult to get information concerning forest fire prevention rules?" both groups agreed that it was pretty difficult. Forty-two percent of the non-violators and 48

percent of the violators thought that it was either difficult to get information or had never tried to get it.

Even more striking, 53 percent of the non-violators and 71 percent of the violators believed that fire prevention laws are not known to most other people.

What Do People Think About Fire Laws?

Even though they don't know what the laws are and can't seem to find out, most people questioned think that fire laws are as important as traffic laws. This applies for both violators and non-violators. People were definite about this point; only about 5 percent said they didn't know about the relative importance, and some of the non-violators tended to consider fire laws even more important than traffic laws. When asked "Which would you observe more carefully?" most people said they would observe fire laws "about the same" as they would traffic laws.

How Do People Feel About Fire Law Enforcement?

Reaction to enforcement depends to a degree on whether one is a violator or a non-violator. The great majority--87 percent-- of the non-violators thought that there should be more law enforcement. The violators were not quite so positive about this; many had no opinion, but less than half thought that there should be less enforcement.

Almost all of the non-violators believed that people contacted by a forest ranger regarding a violation are treated fairly. Only 3 percent thought the treatment might be severe. Of the violators, however, 30 percent said they had not been treated fairly. Although most thought their treatment had been fair, some believed that it had been severe.

Who Violates Forest Fire Laws?

The survey indicates that most fire law violators were well-meaning persons who did not realize that they were making a mistake. However, some made "well-intentioned mistakes" outside the forest, too. When asked "Have you received any traffic citations in the last two years?" fire law violators answering yes outnumbered non-violators three to one. Again, this seems to be a matter of lack of awareness, rather than disregard for law. For example, when asked to name some of the California National Forests they had visited, over half the violators named Yosemite, Joshua Tree, or other National or State parks. Only 5 percent of the non-violators group make this mistake. Similarly, more than half of the violators said they had never seen a burned-over area even though such a sight is difficult to miss in southern California mountains.

To Sum It All Up

We find that San Bernardino National Forest visitors and residents think that fire laws are important. However, they think that it is difficult to get enough information to keep from breaking the law.

Despite an active fire prevention program which has had a notable effect in increasing public consciousness of the fire problem, we have not been very successful in calling people's attention to the fire laws. This is particularly true with the violator group.

In forest fire prevention there appears to be a real need to improve our educational methods. The baseball bat method was the only technique the farmer knew. We hope that continued research can find a more satisfactory method for foresters.

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